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## **Don't Look North Through Rose Tinted Spectacles: Tensions, Struggles and Guiding Lights in Scotland, - A reflection.**

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### **Introduction**

*'Scotland has been developing a remarkable adult literacy and numeracy strategy....[it is].....one of the most dynamic and exciting places in the world right now to be an adult literacy or numeracy practitioner'* ('Why England should look North for inspiration'. Merrifield, J. 2005, pp 21 & 22).

Juliet's and three other articles in the Reflect journal, October 2005, collectively paint a wonderfully rosy picture of policy, strategy and provision north of the border though Juliet herself recognises the *'frustration, confusion, dissatisfaction and resistance'* (p 22) that inevitably accompany radical change on the scale that Scotland is striving to implement. Whilst not intending to counter the key tenets of these articles, nor to deny the innovative work that is undoubtedly happening, I want to talk about the flip side of this 'remarkable' coin; to balance the hype a little and to offer what I see as a more grounded perspective of ALN in the country. I do this because I believe that whilst we justifiably celebrate the 'moment of opportunity' (Hamilton, Macrae & Tett, 2001. p 39) we are presented with, if we cannot publicly debate the tensions, contradictions and shortcomings that we encounter in our literacies' work, we may be in danger of losing the direction, the ideals and ultimately the opportunities that currently excite and spur us forward.

## Policy

To begin at the policy level. Yes, ALNIS (Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland, Scottish Executive. 2001) does refer to a *'lifelong learning approach'* (p 14), does recognise literacies as *'complex skills and knowledge'* and does ground it *'in the context of people's lives'* (p 7). It also significantly affirms that: *'Literacy and numeracy are skills whose sufficiency may only be judged within a specific social, cultural, economic or political context,* (p 7) and such statements have helped frame the ideological basis of the policy and consequent strategic developments. But ALNIS also has its darker parts. It is littered with statements and pages of text that fundamentally contradict the construction of literacies embodied in these quotes. For example the notion of ALN as skills *'whose sufficiency can only be judged'* within different contexts sits uneasily with the identification of the scale of need (pp 8-11), the targeting of priority groups (pp 13-14) and the use of partner professionals to uncover *'latent or invisible need'* (p 15). Although it recognises that the IALS tests *'have been the subject of some criticism'* (p8) it nonetheless draws heavily on them and extrapolates that therefore around 800,000 adults in Scotland have very low literacy and numeracy skills' (p8), thus establishing the target number of new learners for the following three years. So on the one hand, we are steered by statements that clearly locate literacies within the ideological or social practices models that Street (1984), Barton and Hamilton (1998) and others describe, yet on the other hand, we are under pressure to target and rectify the *'skills deficiencies'* of those whom tests indicate have low *'dominant'* literacies skills.

ALN's historical location within community education, and its current embedding in community learning and development offer tremendous potential for innovative ways

of working with partner agencies on their own ground, and ALNIS's advocacy of such work should be lauded. However assigning the role of uncovering latent or invisible need to partner professionals, and naming them '*spotters and referrers*' (p 18) smacks of a literacies police, or a literate enforcement agency whose role it is to ferret out those whose skills are 'deficient' whether they deem them to be so or not. It also triggers an uncomfortable reminder of Armstrong's powerful article critiquing the 'The 'Needs Meeting' ideology in Liberal Adult Education' (Armstrong, 1982). Both again sit uneasily with the relative, wealth model of literacies advocated elsewhere in the policy document.

A further example of such dissonance can be seen in the level of attention given to the employability imperative in ALNIS and the concomitant assumption that the roots of Scotland's mediocre economic prosperity lie in the poor ALN skills of its workforce, i.e. the weak link in the social/economic chain. '*Raising literacy and numeracy levels will help promote.....economic development. In an increasingly globalised economy, Scotland's future prosperity and competitiveness depends on building up the skills of her existing workforce and improving the employability of those seeking work*' (ALNIS p 7). Two things strike me about comments such as this. The first is that they are premised on unfounded assumptions about the *causal* relationship between increasing basic skills and enhanced employment opportunities (see Avis 1996, Coffield, 1999, Field 2000, Keep 2003) because the demand side of employment is circumscribed by a whole range of factors that have little to do with learning. The second is that they promote a narrow type of skills' based learning for earning, that is antithetical to the critical and the creative that are integral to the ideological construction of literacies.

It is ironic that one of the greatest tensions in ALN in Scotland stems from one of the most enlightened sections of the policy. ALNIS affirms that *'the measurement of progress should be based around learner goals and distance travelled'* (p3) not by levels of qualifications attained that can be (mis)used to position providers and countries into meaningless league tables. In other words, the success or otherwise of the policy will be judged by the difference it makes in people's lives and in the communities in which they live. It is the 'so what?' factor that we will be looking for. Now on the one hand this is wonderfully liberating in that it encourages the spread of responsive innovatory work that can challenge and can bring about real change, but on the other hand it opens up a monitoring/accounting void that we have not yet successfully filled. For though we recognise that there has to be public accountability for the spending of public money, there is concern that boxing anecdotal evidence or soft outcomes into measurable indicators places them in danger of becoming the definitive target outcomes to which learning is then artificially orientated. At present, providers and projects supply both statistical and anecdotal evidence of change in the annual partnership reports submitted to the Scottish Executive. It includes the number of learners who have achieved their personal learning goals as identified in their Individual Learning Plans together with case studies of learners for whom aspects of their lives have changed because of their learning, and this is supplemented by research at partnership levels (for example Glasgow City Council, 2006) and national levels (Tett et al 2006), so the body of evidence pertaining to the impact of literacies' learning is growing. The problem is that it is unwieldy, it does not easily transpose into the soundbite statistics that ministers may require to fight their funding battles, and more significantly, it is difficult to isolate the literacies factor from others that

might also have affected learners' lives. The danger therefore is that down the road, more easily measurable indicators may creep into becoming the yardsticks, against that which is not easily measurable, will come to be judged. I believe that if we are pushed in that direction, resistance will be strong and vociferous, but I also recognise that we have to be vigilantly aware of any subtle shifts that may begin to nudge us in that direction.

### **Strategy**

Turning from policy to strategy, while the location of Learning Connections' national ALN team within a regeneration agency (Communities Scotland) does root literacies learning firmly within community contexts, it also creates a number of difficulties for the development and monitoring of work across the country. Communities Scotland's prime responsibility is for housing, as its objectives listed on its website illustrate ([www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk](http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk)). Learning Connections is one of two 'self contained units' (ibid) within the agency, and it is made up of three teams, of which adult literacy and numeracy is the smallest. Of the 500 staff employed by Communities Scotland, only 17 have an ALN remit for the whole of the country which suggests that it cannot have the highest of priorities within the agency as a whole. Furthermore, as an agency of government, its staff are civil servants bound by the strictures of government (Campbell, forthcoming) which limits their critical capacity as advisors and development workers.

Additionally, the siting of ALN within local authority community structures has led to a complex nexus of accounting and responsibility. Campbell (forthcoming) summarises the situation thus: The responsibility for youth work lies with the Scottish

Executive Education Department [SEED], community work is the responsibility of the Scottish Executive Communities Department [SECD] where Communities Scotland is housed, and adult and continuing education is located in the Scottish Executive Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department [ETLLD]. No single department has ultimate responsibility therefore for the adult literacy and numeracy strategy, and as each has separate systems and criteria of accountability, staff on the ground can find themselves pulled in confusingly different directions by the imperatives of their different masters.

## **Practice**

Moving from the strategic to the operational, I now want to question a common assumption about literacies work in Scotland. We frequently hear, and Learning Connections ALN website affirms it, that Scotland has adopted a social practices model, but what do we mean by this? Whilst not wanting to appear unduly pedantic, ‘adopted’ can have two meanings in this context, and I have major concerns that they are used interchangeably. Let me explain. Adopted, in the sense that I believe Learning Connections intends it, refers to the fact that the social practices model is an ideal that we have embraced, that we aspire to and that we are working towards attaining. The alternative meaning suggests that we have taken it on board and it is reflected in practice throughout the country. The former is aspirational, the latter describes what is. In conversations at conferences, meetings, and in the ordinary course of work, I frequently hear the affirmation that ‘we have adopted/use a social practices model’, but then ongoing conversations about practice show that this is not the case. The danger here is that the adage becomes internalised; the assumption is

made that the ideal has been attained and that therefore re-thinking practice is no longer necessary.

Given that the ALN policy was only launched in 2001 and that the first few years were spent building local and national infrastructures for the development of provision, it is hardly surprising that research about the social practices model in Scotland is only now beginning to surface in published research journals. However unpublished Masters' dissertations (Burns 2003, Hunter 2005, McGee 2005) and small scale postgraduate research reports, testify to the mixed, partial and at times total lack of understanding of the concept of literacies as social practices amongst ALN staff. Burns (2003) found in her interviews with practitioners, managers and development workers that though some of the participants had a clear grasp of the meaning and implications of social practices, *'many respondents had taken on the new language without fully appreciating its implications for practice'* (p 49) and that *'people at all levels were confused about the social practices model'* (p38). They believed *'that provision should not be based on a deficit approach but were not able to detect the 'hidden' discourse of deficit that they were engaged in'* and though they talked of social practices, they believed that *'literacy was an individual problem that required individual solutions'* (p 49) which entailed 'topping up' functional skills to an acceptable level. For example, practitioners talked about needing *'to see what they [learners] can't do.....to plug the gaps'* (p31); one manager argued that *'sometimes you do need the deficit model [to understand how learners could] get topped up'* and another explained that in Scotland *'it's only up to intermediate level one,..... so we really are talking about the bottom rung'* (pp28-29).



Burns' conclusions that the concept of social practices was often not clearly understood, and that few respondents had a sense of what it implied for practice, were understandable given that the research was conducted only two years after the policy launch. However that similar findings are still evident in more recent research (Hunter 2005, McGee 2005) does indicate that it is the aspirational rather than descriptive form of 'adopted' that conveys where we stand, and this needs to be clearly articulated and understood in all levels and types of communication. So whilst being learner centred and starting where learners are at, are commendable (and good adult education practice for all learners), they do not *on their own* constitute a social practices model. They represent a good starting point only. Similarly though developing contextualised communicative skills is equally commendable and a part of what social practices implies, it is rare for example, to hear people talking about their literacies work as critical, and as a 'resource for acting back' against the world (Crowther, Hamilton and Tett, 2001). These few illustrative comments show that whilst we *are* working hard towards the normalisation of a social practices approach, we have not yet attained it and still have a long hard road to travel in order to do so. My understanding of literacies as social practices suggests that literacies provision and literacies learning should;

- Recognise, value and validate the wide range of literacies used by learners, as well as their expertise in them,
- Start from people's strengths and aspirations not their weaknesses and perceived needs,
- Understand the significance of different literacies in contexts of practice,
- Recognise and build on the ways that people learn them informally in these contexts,

- Arise from and be embedded in relevant contexts of use,
- Recognise the different values, emotions and perspectives that are always and inevitably embedded in literacies use and literacies learning,
- Be open about the power dimensions of literacies and enable learners to exercise power through different literacies,
- Develop learners critical capacities,
- Develop learners' meta-cognitive capabilities so that the leaning can be transferred and adapted in different contexts.

I wonder how many practitioners or managers would attest to having achieved such ambitious goals? I also wonder how comfortably this 'Communities of Practice' understanding of literacies fits with the universal adoption of Individual Learning Plans that foreground the individual rather than the social or collective nature of learning.

The research cited above all points to the need for more, and more challenging training and I fully support their recommendations. However other research evaluating the national strategy (Tett et al, 2006) shows that those who perhaps have most contact with learners, i.e. part time, short term contract and volunteer tutors, have least, or no access to ongoing training opportunities and frequently work in isolation from other tutor colleagues. The journey towards adoption as a description is likely to be long in such circumstances.

A further barrier to the full adoption (descriptive) of a social practices model in Scotland, is the structuring of the curriculum in further education colleges, where a substantial amount (though still a minority) of provision is located. The **CAVSS**

(Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills) model (Bates, 2005) provides an excellent example of its de-stigmatised integration into vocational learning, but as Bates admits, *'it is currently only operational in 'approximately ten different industry areas in a number of further education colleges across Scotland'* (p27). The norm is for students with assessed 'literacy needs' to be extracted from classes for specialist support which stigmatises them, separates the literacies from the vocational learning and epitomises all that has been discredited in the 'learn first, apply later' model of learning.

This discussion of the tensions and contradictions within which adult literacy and numeracy work in Scotland unfolds, could be extended to include for example, the role of formal assessments in measuring and comparing ALN achievement and levels; the importance of retaining the criteria of change, i.e. the wider benefits of learning as measures of success, but for the purpose of this article, the few examples above will have to suffice.

### **Guiding Lights**

I am acutely aware that this 'other' glimpse of Scotland's adult literacy and numeracy work may paint a depressingly negative picture of activity north of the border and I do not intend this to be the case. There *is* much to celebrate, as Juliet's article and other writing affirm, and there are also some significant guiding lights that should keep the literacies train on the right track. The first of these is the LiC (Literacies in the Community: resources for practitioners and managers) pack. Was it serendipity or fortuitous manoeuvring that resulted in it being used in ALNIS as the benchmark for good practice? It matters not. The outcome is that the quality 'bible' unequivocally

affirms a social practices approach to ALN teaching and learning, and constructs its benchmarks upon the premise that this should frame all aspects of provision. LiC also provides the criteria against which all provision in the 32 local authority partnerships is annually monitored and evaluated. A brief historical reflection is relevant here. We are fortunate in inheriting a tradition of ALN learning in Scotland that is community rather than institutionally based. And whilst this has in part contributed to its history of neglect, it has served to tie it in with the broader aims of community education and community development instead of the more institutional and vocationally oriented structures of further education colleges as it is in England. This positioning, together with the re-affirmation of a sense of Scottish identity that devolution fostered, opened up the possibility of doing things differently north of the border and building on the strengths of its historical alignment.

The second guiding light is the recently launched Curriculum Framework document. Its key sections guide practitioners through the principles, processes and examples of literacies learning, or, as the foreword says, ‘the whats, hows and whys of literacies learning in Scotland today’ (Scottish Executive, 2005, p 5). It does not prescribe; it does not determine content, but it does provide tutors with the tools and the rationale behind them that will enable them to construct informed quality learning experiences in tandem with their learners and in accordance with the LiC principles.

The third is part guiding light, part support and development, and part jack of all trades. It is of course the Learning Connections Adult Literacy and Numeracy team. Notwithstanding the limitations discussed above, it has developed an array of training, support networks, conferences, guides and research/development projects in the space

of a few years that are collectively putting flesh on the policy bones and encouraging innovative practices.

And the rest? The rest is the growing mass of managers, practitioners, partners and academics who recognise, or are coming to recognise what the vision means and the possibilities that it could open up for them. Some may never change old ways of thinking and working; some may try but not succeed, but once the critical mass has been attained, the new literacies converts should secure the footing of the ‘remarkable’ aspects of Scotland’s ambitious policy.

## **Conclusion**

We will never firmly secure these ‘remarkable’ aspects without open, honest and sometimes difficult debate however. And this debate needs to go on and be heard at all different levels, with all our different partners. I am not suggesting that it does not happen. I know that it does at times, between partners subject to different systems of accountability, between neighbouring partnerships and between practitioners in the same and other organisations. I am suggesting however that we need more of it and that it needs a more public voicing. We need to talk openly about the contradictions in policy, how they pull us in different directions and what we can do about it individually and collectively. We need to continually examine what a social practices approach really means, to air our doubts, our uncertainties and our apprehensions about its full implications for practice, and all in a supportive context where there is no fear of censure. And of course we need the outcomes of these debates to be heard and be acted upon by those with the power to orchestrate change. My hope is that this reflective piece will open up some of these debates, or re-kindle them where they

have started and have waned, and I trust that it will be read not as a negative criticism, but as a constructive critique that might make a very tiny contribution to the ongoing development of policy and practice in adult literacies in Scotland. Will my optimism be well founded?

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